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ABSTRACT

Female subjects in this study were induced to harm another person in an alleged "learning" study by administering aversive noise to a confederate-victim as she performed a problem-solving task. The subjects consisted of forty-six female undergraduates enrolled in Introductory Psychology at the University of Toronto. They were randomly assigned to four experimental conditions comprising a 2 x 2 factorial design. Two hypotheses were initially entertained. First, choosing to agress may create greater personal responsibility for the aggressor than nonvoluntary aggression. The second hypothesis assumed that choice may primarily sensitize an aggressor to situational norms concerning aggression. If so, choice may curtail unprovoked aggression primarily when it is situationally defined as being socially undesirable. The results of this study clearly disconfirmed these initial hypotheses concerning the effects of choice upon aggression. In conclusion, this study suggested that in general, portraying harming another as being socially undesirable tends to inhibit the amount of unprovoked interpersonal aggression. (Author/BW)

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Effects of Choice and Social-Undesirability on Unprovoked Aggression

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Numerous studies demonstrate that it is remarkably easy to elicit unprovoked aggression toward another person in the social-psychological laboratory (e.g. Milgram, 1965). Given such findings, isolating variables that would inhibit unprovoked, interpersonal aggression would seem a reasonably compelling topic for research. One potentially relevant variable is the aggressor's phenomenological perception of the situation -- such as the actor's perceived choice in executing his aggressive actions. Prior studies comparing voluntary and nonvoluntary aggression ignore examining whether choice influences the extent of unprovoked aggression directed toward another person (cf. Brock & Pallak, 1969). The present study, however, explores this question and tests alternative formulations of the choice variable as a potential inhibitor of unprovoked aggression.

First, choosing to aggress may create greater personal responsibility for the aggressor than nonvoluntary aggression (cf. Brehm & Cohen, 1962). Moreover, recent models of altruism and aggression (cf. Schwartz, 1968) emphasize the actor's attributions of personal responsibility as a critical factor mediating these behaviors. Consequently, if heightened responsibility inhibits aggressiveness, less unprovoked aggression may occur when it is voluntary than when it is nonvoluntary. An alternative perspective emphasizes that choosing to aggress may make the evaluations and reactions of others salient to the aggressor and elicit personal concern over social disapproval and/or censure for his actions. If so, choice may primarily sensitize an aggressor to situational norms concerning aggression. More specifically, choice may curtail unprovoked aggression primarily when it is situationally defined as having high social undesirability. On the other hand, when aggression is perceived as being less socially undesirable, amount of unprovoked aggression may not vary as a function of perceived choice. These alternative possibilities were tested within a 2 x 2 factorial design experimentally manipulating choice and social-undesirability of aggression.

Method

Overview

Female Ss were induced to harm another person in a alleged, "learning" study by administering aversive noise to a confederate-victim as she performed a problem-solving task. Ss in the choice condition decided between verbal or aversive-noise feedback with strong, implicit pressure for the latter. In the no choice condition, E described both types of feedback being used in the study but summarily assigned S to administer aversive-noise. Ss subsequently overheard a simulated conversation by E concerning the percentage of previous Ss purportedly refusing to administer aversive noise to another person. In the low social-undesirability condition, there were allegedly no prior refusals; in the high social-undesirability condition, 30-40% had allegedly refused. During the aggression trials, S presented feedback to the victim for her problem-solving errors with a switch-apparatus allegedly delivering aversive noise as long as it was depressed. The major dependent variable was the total duration of time across ten "error" trials that Ss had depressed the switch-apparatus. This duration measure was taken as reflecting the amount of unprovoked aggression directed toward the victim.

Subjects

Forty-six female undergraduates enrolled in Introductory Psychology at the University of Toronto participated as Ss in order to fulfill course requirements. Ss were randomly assigned to the four experimental conditions comprising the 2 x 2 factorial design. Data for six Ss were eliminated from the analyses.[1] This left a sample of 40 Ss -- 10 Ss in each cell.

Procedure

S and the confederate were scheduled to arrive for their appointments at approxmiately the same time. To set the stage for subsequently manipulating the social-undesirability of aggression, a note was prominently displayed on the outer door leading to the experimental rooms stating that it was very important for E to call the research-supervisor in charge of the experiment. Upon meeting S and the confederate, E pretended not to notice this note. After introducing herself, E explained that the experiment concerned the process of learning and that they would perform different roles -- one would be the "learner" and the other, the "trainer". To this end, S and the confederate drew lots to determine which role they would perform. By virtue of "rigged lots", the naive S always ended up with the "trainer" role; whereas the confederate always served as the "learner" (i.e., the victim). After their roles had been determined in this manner, E accompanied S into the main experimental room and instructed the confederate-victim to wait in an adjoining room.

E explained to S that the study was investigating the effects of various kinds of feedback on learning. S was given a list of 12 analogy items and an answer sheet. She was told that her role would include reading multiple-choice, analogy questions one at a time to the learner via an intercom system connecting the two experimental rooms. Further, as the "trainer", her task would be to aid the "learner" answer each of these questions correctly and in the fewest possible trials. This was to be accomplished by having her administer feedback for each incorrect response on the learner's part. E further explained that two types of feedback were being assessed in study: viz., verbal feedback (e.g. criticism, reproof) and physical feedback in the form of aversive noise.

Choice Manipulation. In the choice condition, S was given explicit freedom to select between these two forms of feedback, but this "apparent" choice was accompanied by strong implicit pressures to select the use of aversive-noise feedback. Specifically, E said:

> "Now it is up to you which feedback you want to use for the whole experiment. Either you can use verbal or aversive noise feedback. We already have enough people in the verbal feedback condition, so what we really need are people in the noise feedback condition. But it is completely up to you which feedback you want to use. We can always get someone else for the noise-feedback condition".

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[1] One S in the no-choice, high social-undesirability cell failed to overhear the telephone conversation. Two Ss (both from the no-choice, low social-undesirability cell) guessed the true purpose of the experiment. Three Ss misunderstood instructions (two from the choice, low social-undesirability cell and one from the choice,high social-undesirability cell).

In the no choice condition, E "randomly" assigned S to the noise-feedback condition. Thus, Ss in the no choice condition were aware of the alternatives but were not permitted to choose between them.

Following the choice induction, E pointed to a switch-apparatus and explained that it activated a noise-generating device when the switch was depressed. E stressed that it was entirely up to the S to determine the duration of aversive noise which she would administer on any given trial. She also emphasized to the S that the "learner" would receive the aversive noise as long as the switch remained depressed. Further, S was told that although she would hear a sample of the aversive noise feedback before the learning task began, she would not hear any noise during the learning trials since the learner would be receiving it over a set of earphones. Finally, to provide a constant level of demand for aggression across experimental conditions, E mentioned that previous studies had revealed a positive correlation between rate of learning and duration of noise that learners had received.

Social-Undesirability Manipulation. As E was completing her monologue to the S, the confederate-victim knocked on the door of the main experimental room and informed E of the "important note" posted on the outer door. E thereupon retrieved the note and temporarily excused herself from the S while she pretended to call her research-supervisor in S's presence. The simulated telephone conversation concerned the percentage of Ss refusing to administer aversive-noise to another person. To create different levels of social-undesirability for the trainer's role, E varied the alleged percentage of Ss presumably refusing to administer aversive noise. In the low social-undesirability condition, Ss overheard E reporting that no one thus far had refused to administer aversive noise to another person. In the high social-undesirability condition, E claimed a 30-40% rate of refusing to administer aversive noise.

E subsequently joined the victim in the adjoining room and turned on a tape-recording which S overheard on the intercom. S heard E giving background and instructions to the learner, listened to a sample of the aversive noise and heard the learner being told to put on the earphones for the learning task. Out of 12 analogy items, the learner made ten errors. The length of time that S depressed the switch on the "error" trials was recorded by means of an electric stop-clock.

After the aggression trials, S filled out a postexperimental questionnaire containing manipulation checks, reactions to the harm-doing situation, and evaluations of the victim.[2] Finally, E probed for suspicion, explained the deceptions that were practiced, and fully explained the true purpose of the experiment.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Checks[3]

Three items assessed the choice manipulation. Subjects in the choice

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[2] Analyses of the subjects' evaluations of the victim revealed only one apparently meaningless finding. Consequently, these analyses are not reported in the section on results and discussion.

[3] Since direction of outcome was predicted, the F_A values reported for the manipulation checks are one-tailed and were obtained by halving the values from standard F tables.

condition reported more perceived freedom in choosing between verbal and aversive noise feedback and also reported feeling less obliged in having to administer aversive noise to the victim than those in the no-choice condition (F = 106.62; df = 1,36; $p < .01$ and F = 3.91; df = 1,36; $p < .05$, respectively). However, there was no significant difference between the choice and no-choice conditions in how justified subjects felt in administering aversive noise to the victim ($F < 1$). Finally, there were no main effects for social-undesirability nor any interactions between choice and social-undesirability on these items.

Several additional items assessed perceived social-undesirability of aggression. A reasonably direct check on the social-undesirability manipulation asked Ss to indicate how much aversive noise they believed a typical person had administered compared to themselves. Subjects in the high social-undesriability condition indicated that a typical person had administered less aversive noise to the victim than they had, whereas subjects in the low social-undesirability condition did not (F = 6.58; df = 1,36; $p < .01$).[4] Thus the manipulation was successful in inculcating differential expectations concerning the social undesirability of harming another person without provocation. There was, however, no difference between social-undesirability conditions on more indirect items: i.e., expressed liking for the trainer role or the perceived likelihood that they would have participated in the experiment had they known its details beforehand ($Fs < 1$).

Aggression

To determine whether subjects perceived administering aversive noise to the victim as harmful, an item in the postexperimental questionnaire assessed the perceived unpleasantness of aversive noise for the learner. This item included a 21-point rating scale ranging from "not unpleasant at all" (scored as 1) to "very unpleasant" (scored as 21). There were no experimental effects for perceived unpleasantness of receiving noise. However, the grand mean for all subjects was 15.2, which is approximately located as "quite unpleasant" on the rating scale. Thus, subjects actually did perceive receiving noise as aversive for the victim; and it is not misconstruing the nature of their behavior to call it "aggression."

The length of time subjects depressed the switch-apparatus allegedly delivering aversive noise to the victim was recorded in seconds for each "error" trial and summed across the ten "error" trials to obtain a composite measure of harm-doing for each subject. Each subject's overall score was then transformed to natural logs and multiplied by 100. As mentioned earlier, these duration scores were taken as reflecting the extent of unprovoked aggression directed toward the victim.

Effects of Choice and Social-Undesirability

It will be recalled that two hypotheses were initially entertained. First, choosing to aggress may create greater personal responsibility for the

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[4] Unless otherwise noted, df = 1,36 in all cases.

aggressor than nonvoluntary aggression. If heightened responsibility diminishes aggressiveness, less aggression should occur when voluntary than when nonvoluntary. Within the context of the present study, this perspective would primarily predict a main effect for choice upon unprovoked aggression. A second hypothesis assumed that choice may primarily sensitize an aggressor to situational norms concerning aggression. If so, choice may curtail unprovoked aggression primarily when it is situationally defined as being socially undesirable. This perspective would predict an interaction between choice and social-undesirability as determinants of unprovoked aggression. To assess these alternatives, a 2 x 2 ANOVA was performed on the transformed aggression scores. Contrary to predictions, this analysis showed neither a main effect for choice ($F = 1.48$; ns) nor an interaction between choice and social-undesirability ($F < 1$). Instead there was a near-significant main effect for social-undesirability ($F = 3.59$; $p < .07$). Specifically, less unprovoked aggression occurred when it was portrayed as having high, as opposed to low, social undesirability. Moreover, the absence of any effects for choice were not due to any unanticipated byproduct of the choice manipulation. As expected, subjects who chose to aggress did indeed perceive themselves as more personally responsible for administering aversive noise to the victim than did subjects given no choice in this respect ($F = 3.98$; $p < .06$). Thus, although choosing to aggress heightened perceived responsibility for the aggressors' actions, it did not influence the extent to which they aggressed toward the victim.

The aforementioned results clearly disconfirm the initial hypotheses concerning the effects of choice upon aggression. Moreover, since choice heightened personal responsibility, the failure to find effects for choice questions whether increasing an aggressor's perceived responsibility deters his aggressiveness. This outcome is paradoxical in that, as mentioned earlier, recent models of altruism and aggression (cf. Schwartz, 1970) view attributions of personal responsibility as critical in mediating these behaviors. Yet an interpretation in terms of self-attribution processes (cf. Bem, 1965) may account for the apparently discrepant findings concerning choice. From a Bemian perspective,[5] the aggressor's attributions of personal responsibility may simply reflect retrospective self-perceptions of their behavior (i.e., they aggressed) and the conditions under which it occurred (i.e., with prior choice or no prior choice). If so, differential attributions of responsibility elicited as a function of choice could not plausibly inhibit aggression if they did not precede this behavior. From this alternative perspective, the results of the present study do not necessarily impugn the possibility that attributions of responsibility elicited prior to aggression may help to deter the extent of this behavior.

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[5] Bem (1965) has proposed an alternative interpretation of cognitive dissonance phenomena that is also, in effect, a theoretical model of self-attribution. Its basic premise is that self-observers employ precisely the same information as that available to external observers in making attributional inferences from their behavior. In these terms, an individual's self-inferences are based upon observation of his own behavior and a consideration of the situational conditions under which it occurred. For example, the greater the perceived intentionality behind an individual's actions, the greater the personal responsibility for the consequences of his action attributed to the individual by external judges (Shaw and Sulzer, 1964). Likewise, since choice implies intentionality, self-observers should ascribe greater personal responsibility to themselves given a choice to aggress versus no choice in this regard -- according to Bem's model. An important implication of this interpretation for the present study is that an individual's self-inferences occur after the behavior has occurred and are therefore retrospective.

Self-Evaluations

In general, analyses of self-evaluations primarily revealed main effects for social-undesirability that approached significance. Specifically, subjects in the low social-undesirability condition evaluated themselves as weaker ($F = 3.77$; $p < .10$), less systematic ($F = 3.91$; $p < .10$), less intelligent ($F = 4.70$; $p < .05$), less efficient ($F = 3.33$; $p < .10$), colder ($F = 4.51$; $p < .05$), less reliable ($F = 3.90$; $p < .10$), less friendly ($F = 3.67$; $p < .10$), more cruel ($F = 3.62$; $p < .10$) and more guilty ($F = 3.52$; $p < .10$) than subjects in the high social-undesirability condition. These findings seem to complement the obtained results for aggression. That is, it seems plausible that subjects would evaluate themselves in accord with the extent to which they had aggressed against the victim. Since subjects in the low social-undesirability condition exhibited greater aggression toward the victim, it would seem consistent that their self-evaluations would be more generally negative than those for subjects in the high social-undesirability condition, who exhibited more restraint in this respect.

Inhibitors of Unprovoked Aggression

In conclusion, the present study suggests that portraying harming another as being socially undesirable tends to inhibit the amount of unprovoked interpersonal aggression. Moreover, this finding accords with previous speculation that cognitions concerning the social desirability of an action strongly influence the course of actual behavior (cf. Greenwald, 1965). Greenwald (1965) contends that this is because such cognitions have direct bearing upon behavior. It is also conceivable that cognitions concerning social desirability sensitize individuals to situational norms, which are suspected to be particularly potent determinants controlling behavior (cf. Kiesler, Collins, & Miller, 1969). If this line of argument is valid, it suggests investigating normative factors -- e.g., the social responsibility norm (Berkowitz & Daniels, 1964) and the reciprocity norm (cf. Gouldner, 1960) -- as potential inhibitors of unprovoked aggression.

On the other hand, choice countered initial expectations and failed to emerge as an inhibitor of unprovoked aggression -- either in general or more specifically, when aggression was situationally defined as being socially undesirable. As mentioned earlier, choosing to aggress heightened personal responsibility but did not influence the extent of aggression toward a victim. On the face of it, these findings appear to contradict the viewpoint that increasing personal responsibility deters aggression. Yet the aforementioned findings are also reconcilable within a self-attribution interpretation suggesting that the aggressor's attributions of responsibility were perhaps retrospective (rather than anticipatory) and, therefore ineffective in inhibiting aggression. Since measures of perceived responsibility were not secured prior to aggression, the present study cannot distinguish between these alternative viewpoints.

Whatever the case, it may be premature to classify choice as irrelevant for controlling unprovoked aggression. It may be that any inhibitory effects of choice upon aggression depend upon additional variables. One factor that seems especially pertinent is the chronic tendency some individuals possess for anticipating and attributing personal responsibility for the outcomes of their actions. Schwartz (1970) assessed individual differences on this dimension and found it helpful (along with other variables) in predicting altruistic behavior. Further, Schwartz (1968) has proposed that (a) this subject variable may be pertinent to aggression, and (b) individual differences in this dimension

are activated primarily in situations where individuals perceive themselves to be free in determining their course of action. In other words, his analysis suggests that choice may interact with chronic tendencies toward self-attribution in influencing unprovoked aggression. Investigating this possibility may reveal conditions wherein choice does indeed serve to inhibit aggression.

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